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NAS Duty for a WAVE

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I enlisted in the United States Navy for some inspirational reason at the moment, and when I announced at home what I had done I had a very angry father and a hysterical mother. My mother was sure when I left that I had signed my death warrant; and if she had ever known all the things I was doing she would have been sick.

When I left for boot camp at Hunter College in New York City in the summer of 1943 my mother was sure that she would never see me again–alive. I arrived at Hunter College in the year of the monsoon; it rained every day that I was there. Later I married an Easterner and I lived on Long Island for thirty years and I never saw a summer that it rained like that.

At Hunter day ran into night and night ran into day. We were up before sunrise; we were dressed down marching for breakfast. We marched to classes to learn Navy rules and regulations; everything as contained in the Bluejacket's Manual. We learned port from starboard; we learned deck from floor; we learned head from bathroom, and we marched for miles and thousands of miles more, and we were learning things that we were never again going to be called to use. We were tested again and again, to find our aptitudes and possibly our degree of sanity. We were also given shots for every conceivable disease in the world! And we had our teeth gone over with a fine tooth comb. And we got shots in both arms at the same time. We marched and marched, and of course, at the beginning of boot you were on the end of the line in the last battalion, but as the ones ahead of you graduated and left for active duty, you moved to the front, and I have to say by the time it was your turn to be on the front of the line, you were proud as punch.

One thing I learned in boot camp was how to live in close quarters with others. We lived in two-bedroom apartments along the avenues that surrounded Hunter College. Each room, including the living room, had four double deck bunks; every room excepting the kitchen. There were twenty-four girls from different walks of life in those close quarters. We did have shower rooms set off from these apartments. The kitchen was used in my time for hanging up your wet clothes to dry, and in my time we never had anything dry to put on. At boot camp you also lost your first name forever; you answered to your last.

Our uniforms were issued at boot camp and we were a proud lot. Everyone thought our uniforms were the most feminine in the services. Our uniforms were designed by a top fashion designer whose name comes back to me as Mainbocher; we were issued Navy blues and we thought they were great. We never wore a tie, but a silk scarf tied in a square knot under our collar. Our hats, though, were OK but they didn't flatter anyone; the Navy never got it right on our part; even a garrison hat, which blew off in the wind and in the prop wash never really was right for us.

The one thing we all hated with a passion was our tie oxfords; we called them EnnaJetticks. I know that we couldn't have marched those thousands of miles

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This paper is adapted from a speech before the Capt. Wendell Oury Chapter of the DAR, meeting in Murray, October 2, 1993.

without them, but did we ever hate those shoes! Our purses we loved; they were leather and we wore them across our bodies. We wore white gloves and we had both hands free. It was very comfortable; no shoulder bag hanging off your shoulder as they do today. We learned to march with our chest out and our tummies in; our hands were always in white gloves.

The big day came when I was sent with many others to the Hoboken Ferry to board a train. I arrived in Corpus Christi, Texas, seven days later. Where was I for seven days? Well, mostly in rail yards. The girl who had the lower bunk would raise her shades and say we were in a rail yard. We'd wake up in the morning and we were still in a rail yard. However, all during the night the train went *crash*! Then it went the other way *crash*! It would back up a little more; it would go forward. We didn't know what was going on, but anyway we saw a lot of nice rail yards.

On the fourth day we arrived in St. Louis, and then we were told that we could walk on the platform for twenty minutes. It was then that we realized that we were part of a long, long, troop train. We females were accommodated in sleepers and we had had our own diner. On the platform we realized that soldiers were also quartered on that train in double deck bunks in boxcars. Three days out of St. Louis I arrived in Corpus Christi and found out that everything I owned was out.

South Texas is regarded as tropical climate, and I was issued whites, seersucker dresses, and oh-how-lovely pump shoes. The Navy legislated hem lengths and heel heights, and you can realize why because you couldn't have somebody in uniform teetering in spike heels. It would ruin the uniform. But, while civilians were buying shoes on stamps, we could get shoes. Our boot camp stockings were something to be remembered, but by the time we got to Texas we got nylons. We kept our Navy blue raincoats, but I never wore my Navy blues again except when I went home on leave, or for those magical, marvelous inspections, where everybody on the base had to dress down and stand in the hot sun for hours, while the captain went by, to see if your hair cleared your collar; if you were clean and all those other things; if your shoes were shined.

The seersucker dresses were a dream. They had a shirtwaist top; they had a side zipper and they had a box pleat front and back, and they were most flattering to most figures. They washed beautifully and you never had to iron them. I have never seen seersucker of that quality anywhere since. If I could find it, I'd buy it.

In Corpus Christi I was told that I was to be the chief bookkeeper for the club's office at NAS Kingsville, that was sixty-five miles out in nowhere. To that place I was sent and I found my office in the administration building. I also found that my bunk was in one of only two barracks. The barracks were one long row with showers, sinks, and toilets in the back along with the wash house for doing your laundry. Space was divided by four double deck bunks, then a row of lockers, more bunks, more lockers, but no walls. These two barracks were surrounded with an anchor chain fence probably ten feet tall, with a roll of steel wire on top. The only other time I saw rolled steel wire so used was when I passed an upstate New York prison. There was only one gate entrance to our compound, at which stood a guard shack and at all times there was a Marine on duty, day and night.

The Navy never told us our duty was other than to replace a man for active duty; we were to be assigned something a female could do to release a man for active service. Not so today. Kingsville had only seventy five Waves. We had four daytime squadrons and two night fighter squadrons. Seven of our Waves were

control tower operators; about a dozen were parachute packers, and yes, they had to jump with the parachutes they packed. That has been rumored, but that is true; they did. Our aerologist and meteorologist was a girl. Many of our gunnery instructors, Link trainer operators, radio operators, and seven of the best mechanics that the pilots said were on the flight line. In all, the majority were involved in secretarial duties, both in the administration and on the flight line.

Living was interesting. Those attached to night fighter squadrons slept during the day. Those who worked in daytime pursuits slept during the night. At all times someone was coming or going. Remember there were no walls in this building, and there were planes flying directly over us day and night. We learned to sleep through anything. We learned to sleep through someone else's reveille, through somebody else's taps, through somebody going out to the night squadron, somebody coming back from night duty, from somebody going out in the morning; we just learned. We had no TV, and we had no radio, because in those close quarters, it would be impossible to play a radio, and personal earphones hadn't yet been invented.

My job turned out to be most interesting. As I look back on it now I have to smile about a lot of things. I started out the first week keeping accounts receivable and accounts payable. I also made up bank deposits each day. Within one week of my arrival, I passed my first monthly audit. I was then called to the Captain's office and I was told that I was to be bonded. Well, OK, bond me. I was next told that I was to be the courier for the money from the club's office to Kingsville. So, OK. I started out by driving my superior officer's own personal car, then other officers' cars, and I figured that one out: a different car every day on the road for the seventeen miles from the air base to Kingsville was smart. Same person, different car.

I was then told to go to ship's service and get a pair of navy blue slacks which had never been issued to me. Only certain people on the flight line wore slacks, and a few of the mechanics wore blue jeans, but that was all. Next I was sent each morning in my new slacks to the motor pool, and there a kindly old Chief would instruct me in the gears of different vehicles. I had learned to drive a gear-shift car, you know, a stick shift car. But I had no idea that all these vehicles had a different way of shifting. Well, I had to learn that. After my motor pool lesson I would return to my barracks, change my clothes, and I would go back to work in the office or I would go down to the club. I had the keys to all the cash registers and I would get all the money and then I'd have to go back to the office and count it out and find the bills, make out the deposit slips, and off I'd go to the bank.

Probably on the word of the Chief, I was assigned a motor pool vehicle for my trips to the bank and to the office. Sometimes a Jeep; sometimes a stack bodied truck; sometimes a recon vehicle–that's a real cutie. My favorite was an old grey Navy pickup that said USN on the side, and it was so old that the windshield opened out from the dashboard and in due time the little gismo that closed it no longer worked so you had an open windshield whether you wanted it or not.

Then one morning I was told to report to the gunnery range. Now this gave me a little pause, but in the Navy you never question why, you just do or die. There I was taught to load, unload, and fire, and hit a target; which gun had a safety catch, which gun did not; and each free morning I had to report to the gunnery range and I tell you this was the most grueling experience, but I can fire!

My next instructions were to report for a driver's test, for suddenly I had to have

a US Navy driver's license. I had been driving on my own home state license. When I arrived at the testing spot at that appointed time, there was my smiling old Chief, and of all things, an 18-wheeler. And I thought, oh, well, that's not for me–until they called my name! Do any of you have any idea how high a cab on an 18-wheeler is? Well, as I said, it is the question to do or die, so up I got. Now there was a serpentine route laid out with orange cones and they told me that if knocked down more than three, "You're disqualified." I know I got through it post haste; but when I got to the end, I heard that awful word, "back up." Now that I'll never know. But I do feel to this day that if they had given it to me, if I knocked more than three down, the other Navy men that were standing around would have been screaming, "Not fair! Not fair! Not fair!" I have no idea for the only cones I could see were the ones I could see in my own rear view window; over there I didn't know what was going on. Anyway, I passed that test, and I got a US Navy driver's license. I think on that day, though, I had bit nearly through my lower lip.

With the arrival of the license, I was then called to the Captain's office and I was told that I would be issued a garrison belt with shells and a .45 with a safety catch each day from the Officer of the Day. He gave me a very, very fatherly talk. He told me if I was ever stopped or I was ever approached, or if I was frightened, not to fight for the money but to hand it over, cause I was bonded; they weren't out anything. And I wanted to say to him, "I could kill somebody by throwing this gun." You didn't have to fire a .45! And then he dropped the other shoe. He said I was going to carry the cash for the ship's service.

Now ship's service is the same thing as a PX in the Army, and it takes in a considerable amount of money every day, because it includes money from the ship's store, money from the pool hall, money from the movie theater, money from the cafeteria, and the daily take from ship's service. It ran around $90,000 and then when you put club's money with it I was carrying over $100,000 a day.

I will never forget my first encounter with the Range Riders. Kingsville NAS was on leased land from King Ranch which was well over a million acres in one tract. These Range Riders were older men who rode the range: they were well armed; they had rifles in their saddles. The first day that I met one, and he saw me struggling into the bank with these money bags, because I was only 118 pounds, and I was not allowed to take one in and leave one in the truck; I had to get them both in there at the same time, and I'm wearing a garrison belt, he looked like, "What will they come to?" In due time, the bank guard would come out and help me handle that money and in due time, I got the Texas Range Riders to tip their hats.

The next thing I was entrusted with was the keys to the warehouse. This was the only thing that I resented a little bit. On some occasions liquor, beer, or soda ran short in the club or in ship's service, and the officer that had had the key lived in town with his wife and family. It was 17 miles to the bank; it was 17 miles back, so the best thing to do was give me that key. I did resent that. Many times I was called out in the night, but I did not have to go wandering around in the night. When something was needed, the Officer of the Day was notified, they came with a Jeep, they picked me up at my barracks; I did not have to enter the warehouse alone; then they escorted me back to my barracks. Besides everything else, I had a full time job at bookkeeping.

If any of you saw the movie "Giant," although Hollywood denies it, it really was King Ranch. They said it was nearly a million and a half acres in one tract, and the

King daughter, who married a Kleberg, was still living at that time as was her brother, whose surname was King. They had an annual barbeque, and every person on Kingsville Naval Air Station was invited to that barbeque regardless of rate, rank, or color. And everybody went, who was not otherwise on duty. And I must admit it was the first time I ever saw a whole cow and a whole pig on a spit.

Can I load and fire a handgun? Yes. Can I hit what I aim at? I think so, but it's been fifty years. How many of those cones did I knock down when I was backing up that 18-wheeler? I'll never know. Was it interesting? Yes. Am I proud of the faith they placed in me? Yes. And to top it all off, the Navy hired me in the same capacity when the war was over and after I was discharged.